

**Panel Discussion and Dialogue with
Private Foundation Grantmakers**

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ENGAGING PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Foundation Culture: What kinds of projects do grantmakers like to fund?

The three key words to remember here are: alignment, alignment and alignment. Foundations and their boards of trustees spend a great deal of time establishing how available funds can affect the areas they care about the most. Obtaining funds from foundations that address the kinds of issues we do calls for a highly-strategic approach. To start, review the foundation's website or available background materials, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the foundation's website use the same words, phrases and terms to describe their grantmaking priorities as we do to describe our mission/vision?
- How will our proposed activities help to advance the foundation's area of focus?
- How can I demonstrate that the work of my organization is aligned with the foundation's grantmaking goals and priorities?

Bottom Line: You can make a strong impression during your initial contact with program staff by highlighting how your work aligns with the foundation's grantmaking goals and priorities.

Winning Proposals: What makes a proposal stand out?

First, be sure that the foundation accepts unsolicited applications. Many do not. Others prefer that you submit a letter of inquiry ("LOI") or concept paper prior to submitting a complete proposal. (Often you can do this directly from their websites.) Once you have determined that you can submit a proposal, remember those three magic words. (Hint, the first one is alignment.) We also suggest three additional terms for you to keep in mind as you prepare your proposal: capacity, strategy, and data, and do the following:

- Provide an overview of the issue or issues your proposed activities will address, highlighting why your organization, your staff and your approach are most appropriate.
- Be clear about what you seek to achieve and how and why the proposed activities will result in the desired outcomes. If you have statistics or research that supports your proposed strategy, include this information.
- Present a well-researched and realistic financial plan for the project. Unrealistic program budgets or revenue projections undermine—and may even invalidate—otherwise thoughtful and well-constructed project narratives. When assessing your request, program officers often ask: Is the budget realistic, appropriate, and valid in relationship to the proposed activities, the organization's overall capacity and annual revenue, and grants of similar scope and scale?
- Finally, foundations love data, metrics, benchmarks, evidence, proof points, objectives... We could go on, but you get the picture. State how you will monitor progress related to the activities and goals of the grant. The last thing you or the foundation wants is to learn when the grant period is over and the funds are spent, that your program was ineffective.

Relationship Maintenance: What can grantees do to ensure the funder's confidence?

Consider your relationship with your program officer to be a partnership. Good partnerships thrive when there is timely, honest, on-going and engaged communication from both parties. To build and maintain a productive relationship with your program officer, remember to...

- Be in touch. Once you become a grantee, share updates on important activities, put foundation staff on your e-mail / snail mail distribution list, and invite foundation staff to important meetings. We like to be kept in the loop.
- Be timely. Submit requested materials by the deadlines outlined in your grant agreement. If you need an extension, ask for it early! Try to respond to any calls or inquiries from program staff within a few days. When you contact us, we will do the same. This is a two-way street!
- Be open and honest. If an activity does not go as planned and you want to make changes to your program, tell foundation staff right away. We realize that proposals include proposed activities with expected outcomes. Just be prepared to make a strong case for how the changes you suggest will address the issues that have come up.
- Be engaged. Consider your program officer to be a critical friend – we trust and support you, but we will ask the tough questions with one goal in mind – your success in realizing the goals you have identified. But if you do not agree with foundation staff on an issue, say so! You are the experts and we learn from you. Your input will help us do our work better.

Foundation Guidelines: Are they set in stone?

Foundation guidelines are often just that...guidelines. However, keep in mind that these guidelines are intended to...

- Help applicants determine if their proposed program or project can advance the overall grantmaking priorities and objectives of the foundation.
- Provide a foundation's program staff with a common way to assess whether proposed activities from various organization align (There's that word again!) with the foundation's goals, priorities and mission. The guidelines objectively structure the input we receive and inform the decisions we make.

The following is from *The Complete Guide to Grantmaking Basics* a book for new foundation program officers. Not all of these questions are relevant to any proposal, however in preparing a new proposal one might wish to review these questions and determine which are relevant and should be answered. Too many proposals focus on one or two of the following and leave out other critical information. Remember to answer the What, Why, Where, When, Who, How and How much.

1. **What** is the applicant organization proposing to do?
 - a. What are its goals?
 - b. Are its proposed activities likely to achieve these goals?
 - c. Beyond these stated goals, what other changes are likely to occur by the project's end?
 - d. Does the proposal clearly describe and justify the project's ongoing activities?
 - e. Does it offer insights into how the project will be structured, staffed, and managed?
2. **Why** is this project being proposed?
 - a. What needs does it address?
 - b. What evidence establishes the existence of these needs?
 - c. Are these needs important?
 - d. What kinds of benefits will be derived from the project's implementation?
 - e. Are any unintended positive (or negative) effects likely?
3. **Where** will the project take place?
 - a. Why was this area selected?
 - b. Will the project have influence or repercussions elsewhere?
4. **When** will the project take place?
 - a. What is the timeline for accomplishing the work?
 - b. Is the timeline realistic?
 - c. Are there any crucial deadlines that must be met?
 - d. Is the organization capable of keeping to the timeline and meeting its deadlines?
5. **Who** will participate in the project?
 - a. Who will the program serve?
 - b. Are they the right target group given the project's goals?
 - c. Who will provide the services?
 - d. What are their capabilities?
 - e. Who will oversee the project?
 - f. What are their qualifications?
 - g. Is anybody else attempting similar projects?
 - h. Is a consultation, collaboration or alliance with other organizations being considered? If not, why?
6. **How** are the chances of success being maximized?
 - a. Is the project's approach practical?
 - b. Does it demonstrate an understanding of best practices in the field?
 - c. Have other organizations gotten results by using equivalent means?
 - d. Are you aware of similar programs that have run into serious problems in the past?
 - e. Are there any crucial difficulties the proposal has not anticipated?
 - f. How will success be measured?
7. **How much** will the project cost?
 - a. Is the budget adequate to carry out the program?
 - b. Has the budget been padded to absorb unrelated expenses?
 - c. Is the organization using any of its unrestricted resources to support the project?
 - d. Have other funders committed their support?
 - e. How will the project continue after your funding is over?